



PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

Quarterly Publication of the Graphics Philately Association

Volume 43, Number 3 • Whole Number 170 • July 2021

ISBN 9739-6198

Hiroshige's 53 Stations of the Tōkaidō Road Woodblock Prints

Stuart Van Leer Bradley, Jr.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) (fig 1) was invited to take the journey from Edo (now Tokyo), which was the business capital of Japan at the time, to Kyoto where the Emperor lived. The purpose of the trip on the Tōkaidō Road was to deliver tribute horses to the Emperor from the shogun in Edo. The year was 1832, and Hiroshige had already proven himself as a talented artist.

Hiroshige made sketches along the way, and when he was back in Edo he created the 55 woodblock prints that

made up the famous and popular “Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road” (fig 2).

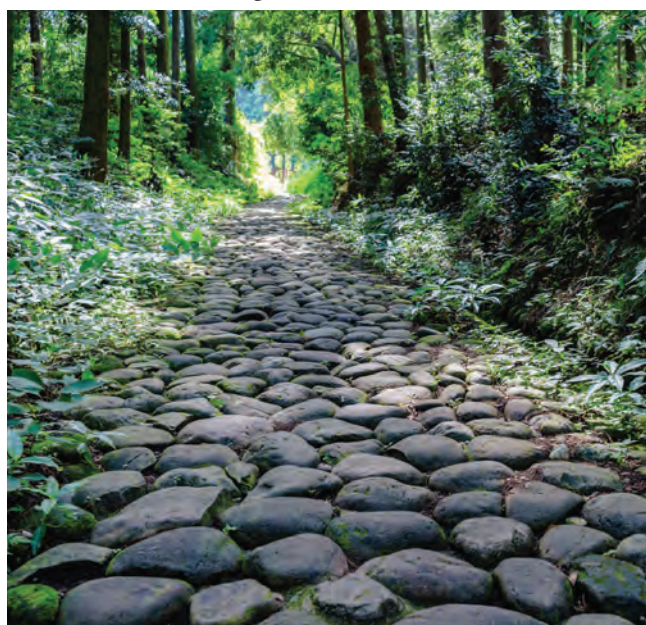


Fig. 2. A contemporary photograph of a portion of the original Tōkaidō Road.



Fig. 1. Memorial Portrait of Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) by Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865).

Hiroshige was a master of the “ukiyo-e” genre which flourished from the 17th through 19th centuries. He specialized in landscape prints in particular. *cont. on pg 28*

THIS ISSUE

Hiroshige's 53 Stations of the Tōkaidō Road Woodblock Prints	25 & 28–29
GPA News	26
GPA Financial Report for 2020	27
Four Seasons: A Unique Approach ..	27
My Life with Stamps	30–31
2020 P-G New Issues Scott Numbers	32
New Issues of Graphic Interest	32–36

cont. from pg 25

The reason these woodblock prints were so popular was that Hiroshige included scenes from all types of weather, all the seasons, and portrayed ordinary people going about their ordinary tasks.



Fig. 3. Japan 1960. *Night Snow at Kambara*. The print (above) that illustrates this stamp (left) is considered the best of the Tōkaidō series. [Sc704]

His winter scene, Station #16 Kambara (fig 3), is considered a masterpiece of the woodblock art form. However, this winter scene is imaginary. The location has not been found, and it very rarely snows in Kambara. Hiroshige was traveling in early summer so he did not experience snow. He was motivated by a desire



Fig. 4. Japan 2008. *Mishima*. The print (above) that illustrates this stamp (left) is admired for its impression of morning fog and mist. [Sc3065]

to portray every season.

The Shinto Shrine Mishima (Station #12) is where in 1180 Minamoto no Yoritomo vowed to overthrow the government (fig 4). Because he succeeded in setting up his own shogunate, his descendants revere this shrine. The print shows Hiroshige's amazing ability to give the impression of the morning fog and mist as the group in the foreground set off on their day's journey.

The stations have also been called stages or views. They were the stopping points along the way, and many of the views included Mount Fuji in the distance. In the 1830's these woodblock prints were accessible to ordinary Japanese people the same way later generations would be entertained by stereoview photographs, slide shows, and photo books. One artist that was heavily influenced by these Japanese woodblock prints was Vincent Van Gogh. Below is Station #46 Shono showing travelers in a heavy rainstorm (fig 5).



Fig. 5. Japan 2002. *Shono—Rainstorm in mountains with umbrellas*. The print (above) illustrates this stamp (left). [Sc 2836]

In the village of Ishiyakushi (Station #45) there was a small stone statue of Buddha that attracted many worshipers. In the print illustrated on the stamps in the sheetlet shown at the top of the next page (fig 6) Hiroshige has used layers of green, gray, and blue to outline the mountain range in the distance.

There were three important steps in the process of making these woodblock prints. The process was this:



Fig. 6. Japan 2013. *Ishiyakushi—Village with blue hill in background (sheetlet)*. [Sc 3602]

Hiroshige would finish his painting. The engraver would carve the “key” block that included the frame of the print and was often printed in black. After the key block, the engraver would carve a number of color blocks for each of the colors that would make up the finished print.

For the printer, the registration of the prints was everything. Various colors were laid down in an edition of prints. Then the key block with the black would be printed last in most cases so that the frame and black lines would print over the colors. The engraver and printer were talented artists in their own right, but in Japan they were considered craftsmen. Only the artist was recognized.

In 1958, Japan Post issued the first stamp based on Hiroshige’s Tōkaidō Road series. They chose the last one, #55 Kyoto. The 53 Stations yielded 55 prints by adding the departure point in Edo and the arrival in Kyoto. Most of the stamps were printed in sheetlets of ten for International Letter Writing Week each year.

It took the Japanese stamp agency 61 years to issue all 55 stamps. This was accomplished in 2019 and was followed by the issuance of an enormous 11 by 14 inch “souvenir sheet” in 2020 containing eleven rows of five stamps and including all 55 stations in their order from Edo to Kyoto (see *Philateli-Graphics*, April 2021, page 24). These are actually different stamps as they are all 70 Yen and they lack the tag line “International Letter Writing Week” which is on the earlier versions of these stamps.

Japan has issued stamps featuring other beautiful Hiroshige prints. In the 1960s, the Tokai Bank of Japan published three large reproductions (fig 7) made from the originals in their bank vault. They were enclosed in a beautiful folder.



Fig. 7. Station #50 *Tsuchi-yama*.

GPA member Stuart Bradley’s Railway Station Press published the book *Hiroshige’s Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road on Japanese Stamps, 1958 to 2019*. His press has also published other philatelic-related books. Visit the website: www.RailwayStationPress.com